



## CHAPTER TWO

# UNCLE JEFF'S ACCIDENT AND THE ORIGIN OF THE CHIP

The first few months after the Rosses brought Stanley home from the hospital were total, uninterrupted bliss. The new parents loved waking up in the middle of night to feed him or quiet his crying with rocking and lullabies. They embraced changing his dirty diapers, or “nappies,” as Jane called them, and rinsing his spit up from their clothes. There was nothing about their son that Jane and James did not view as perfect, not a moment of time with him they did not cherish.

Jane made him a special red outfit for his first Christmas, with a little matching Santa hat. They took pictures and mailed them to Jeff, whom they hadn't heard from since the day Stanley was born. They received no belated Christmas card in return, no reply at all. New Year's came and went, and soon it was February. James began to worry. By the time March rolled around, he was slightly frantic.

“You would've heard if something bad had happened,” Jane said, trying to soothe James's nerves. “It's just Jeff being Jeff. You know how he loses track of time, forgets to return calls. The man forgets to eat half the time. Can you ring one of his

colleagues at the university and ask them to track him down for you?"

"I didn't want to have to go that route, and risk potentially embarrassing him in front of his co-workers, but I suppose I don't have a choice if I want peace of mind."

"You shouldn't be so forgiving this time when you get a hold of him. He knows how much you worry. It's plain inconsideration on his part."

It was true that it wasn't out of character for Jeff to be incommunicative, but James thought it was odd that his brother hadn't checked in at least once to inquire about how the baby was doing. He could be thoughtless, but never cold. It made James think that something was possibly quite wrong this time. So, having no idea who his brother's friends were, or who his landlord was, James saw no other option but to phone the school's research department and ask the very young-sounding girl who answered the phone if she would be so kind as to put him in touch with Dr. Jeffrey Ross. She was completely frazzled by the request.

"Dr. Ross, you say?"

"Yes, he's a professor there."

"Yes, yes I know. Or at least...well...You're his brother, you say?"

"That's right. James Ross."

"Okay, well, we've actually been trying to track you down, Mr. Ross."

James felt like he swallowed a brick. "Why? What's wrong? Has something happened to Jeff?"

"Well, um, let me see if I can find Dr. Warren. Please hold for just a moment."

"But—" James wanted more information before the girl put him on hold.

“I’m sorry, sir, but you really must speak with Dr. Warren.”

And with that she was gone, and James was left standing panic-stricken in his kitchen, waiting to learn his brother’s fate from a stranger three thousand miles away. His clammy hand was gripping the phone receiver so tightly that his knuckles turned white. It seemed like he was standing there for an eternity, listening to the ticking of the clock on the wall—a cuckoo clock his mother had loved, which he wouldn’t allow Jane to take down even though it drove her nuts. But according to the clock only three minutes had passed before someone was on the line. It was a man this time.

“Mr. Ross?”

“Yes.” James’s voice cracked.

“Mr. Ross, this is Dr. Donald Warren. Up until three weeks ago I was a colleague of your brother’s.”

“Uh huh. Wait, what do you mean ‘up until three weeks ago’?”

“Mr. Ross, do you know where your brother is? And I need you to be honest with me. This is a very serious situation.”

“No, Dr. Warren, I’m afraid I don’t. That’s why I’m calling you... I mean the university. I haven’t heard from Jeff in some time, since Thanksgiving.”

“That sounds about right. Around Thanksgiving your brother flew to New York to meet with someone. Do you know who?”

“No, he didn’t say. I only saw him for a few hours.”

“Did he discuss his work with you at all?”

James hesitated before answering. “This may sound strange to you, Jeff and me being brothers and all, but no, we never discuss his work. Quite frankly, I haven’t understood most of what comes out of his mouth since he was in junior high. And anyway, my wife had just had a baby that day. That’s what we talked about.” James hoped the pause hadn’t given him away.

“Your brother was working on a project that the university didn’t sanction, Mr. Ross. He had been warned several times to cease his experiments. We believe he had some kind of a major breakthrough not long after Thanksgiving. However, he wouldn’t share his information with us. That information, Mr. Ross, is the property of the university. Then, three weeks ago, he disappeared, along with all of his notes and some very critical items from his lab. Or, shall I say, the university’s lab.”

James felt his body relax a little bit. The situation wasn’t good, but it wasn’t as bad as he had initially thought. Jeff was missing, and apparently in a serious amount of trouble, but he might still be okay.

“As you can imagine, Dr. Warren, what you’re saying comes as a huge shock to me. I really can’t believe my brother would do something like that.” That was a bold-faced lie—this was exactly something James expected of Jeff.

“Yes, well, be that as it may, he did it. I’m sorry to be conveying such upsetting news over the phone, but it really is quite urgent that we find your brother. If he returns to the university what he took, we may be able to work out some kind of deal and avoid a messy criminal case. We’re not out to ruin anyone’s career here—we just want what belongs to us. It’s really in Dr. Ross’s best interest to cooperate.”

“I understand, Dr. Warren. And I agree, completely.” James was leaning with his elbow on the counter, his forehead resting on his closed fist. His eyes were shut. The ticking of the clock sounded much louder in his ears than Dr. Warren’s voice.

“Do you have contact information for any of your brother’s friends, Mr. Ross? Any idea where we might find him?”

“No, unfortunately I don’t. Have you tried his apartment?”

“Yes, his landlord let us in. There was no sign of him, and no clues as to where he might be. His apartment actually didn’t

appear to be particularly lived in, but that's understandable given how much time he was spending in the lab lately." James silently questioned the legality of the university going through his brother's private things, but he didn't imagine law enforcement would find his brother to be a sympathetic victim at the moment.

"If I hear from Jeff I'll relay your message, about the possibility of working out some sort of a deal."

"Please do that, Mr. Ross. And again, I'm sorry to have to inform you of this. I imagine you find it quite upsetting."

"Quite."

"You know where to reach me, Mr. Ross. I hope we can resolve this sooner rather than later."

"Yes, Dr. Warren. Good day." James walked over to the mounted phone base and hung the receiver up softly. He had no idea what to do.

As it turned out, he didn't have to do anything at all. The situation had indeed resolved itself sooner rather than later, and tragically so.

Late that evening, or rather early the next morning, while Jane was in the nursery with Stanley, the phone rang. As always, the sound of the ringing phone in the silence and darkness of night was louder and more startling than its sound during the day. But James was not startled. He was not sleeping—he had found it impossible. He had lain in bed next to Jane for hours, first talking things over with her, then tossing and turning next to her while she slept. When she got up to feed the baby, James did not follow. He didn't want his agitation and restlessness to affect Stanley—he knew that babies sense those things. So instead he remained in bed, staring at the ceiling.

He could hear Jane humming a lullaby to Stanley as she rocked him in the next room. He knew, without having to see

her, that the chubby little baby was pressed tightly against her body, nestled in the crook of her warm arm. After listening to his wife's soothing song for a few minutes, James sat up and threw the covers off. His eyes, at that point, had adjusted to the dark. He could make out the outline of furniture, of his shirt hanging on the knob of the door. He turned to the nightstand next to him, as if in anticipation of the sound he was about to hear—the disturbing trill of a phone at 2:00 a.m.

James reached over, quite casually, as if the phone rang every day at 2:00 a.m., and brought the receiver to his ear. "Yes?"

"Is this James Ross?" The voice on the other end was not much louder than a whisper. James could hear sirens in the background.

"Yes, this is he."

"Mr. Ross, I'm a friend of your brother's. I'm sorry to be calling you like this..." The man's voice trailed off, as if he'd gotten distracted.

"Yes?" James questioned the man impatiently. "What about my brother?"

"I'm afraid there's been an accident. An explosion. Jeff is badly hurt." The man sounded as if he might cry.

"Who is this?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that. Jeff is at St. Vincent's. They're still working on him in the emergency room."

*So he's been in the city all this time, James thought. This must be the colleague he met with at Thanksgiving.*

"Working on him?"

"Yes. The ceiling caved in on him. I think—I think both of his legs are broken. I must go now, Mr. Ross. I can't stay here. Please come. Please hurry. The emergency room of St. Vincent's." And then the sound of the sirens was replaced by a dial tone.

James turned on the light. Jane was in the doorway, holding Stanley.

“What is it? Was it Jeff?”

“No, I don’t know who it was. I think it might’ve been the man Jeff was here to see over Thanksgiving. He said Jeff’s been in an accident—an explosion. He told me to go to St. Vincent’s. Then he hung up.”

“Are you going to go?”

“Of course.”

“You should know I don’t like this, James. I don’t like it one bit.” Jane pulled Stanley close to her and began pacing the room with him. “Jeff could be mixed up in something dangerous.”

“I’d say so, given that a ceiling fell on him.” James got up and began to dress. “I have to go to him, Jane. This whole thing may be one big misunderstanding. You know I’d never do anything that would endanger you or Stanley. But he’s my brother, and he’s hurt. I have to go.”

Jane stood still in the middle of the room. Stanley was beginning to stir in her arms. He was such a good baby—he could sleep through anything. He hadn’t paid any mind at all to the ringing phone. But he could sense the tension in the room and feel the anxiousness in his mother’s movements. “There, there, little one,” she said as she kissed his head and patted his back. “It’s all right, sweet boy.”

James had finished getting dressed. He walked over to his wife and son and embraced them. “I’ll call you as soon as I know anything,” he said, and rushed down the stairs, out of the house to the car.

It only took James about thirty minutes to get to the hospital at that time of night. He used the emergency room entrance and quickly found the admissions desk. He was much calmer than he

expected he'd be. Ever since he'd spoken to Dr. Warren the afternoon before, he'd been running over possible scenarios in his head, none of them good. Finding his brother in a hospital wasn't that much of a surprise. At least Jeff was in the emergency room and not the morgue.

"I'm looking for Jeffrey Ross."

"Who are you looking for?" The nurse evidently hadn't heard him.

"Jeffrey Ross. He was brought here earlier tonight."

"No one by that name was brought in here, sir."

"I was told he was. He's thirty-six years old. Brown hair, although last time I saw him he was starting to lose it. He may have a beard. I was told he was in some sort of explosion and a ceiling caved in on him." James stated this all rather matter-of-factly; as if a ceiling collapsing on him was something that happened to Jeff every day.

"Oh, you're talking about our John Doe then. The police are trying to track down his family now."

"Well, I'm it."

"Lorene, do you know where our John Doe is?"

"Surgery. One of the officers who came in with him is over there by the payphone." Lorene pointed toward the emergency room waiting area. "You should have a seat in there anyway, sir."

"Thank you. Do you know any more about my brother's condition, other than he's in surgery?"

"Spinal cord injury, I think. The doctor on call will fill you in. I'll page him."

"Thank you. Please do."

James suddenly felt sick to his stomach. Spinal cord injury. *Maybe it's not that bad*, he said to himself. *Maybe they can fix it. Jeff said they'll be able to fix things like that soon.* He took a

deep breath and walked up to the officer who had been pointed out to him.

“Sir, I believe you’re looking for me. I’m Jeff Ross’s brother, James.”

“Who’s Jeff Ross?”

“Sorry—he’s your John Doe, I believe.”

“No kiddin’? How’d you find out he was here? We haven’t contacted anyone.”

“Someone phoned. A man. He didn’t give his name and I didn’t recognize his voice. He told me Jeff had been in an accident.”

“Tell me, Jim, what line of work is your brother in?”

“He’s a PhD. A scientist. He works for a university.”

“That adds up. It seems your brother—. What’d you say his name is? Jeff? It seems Jeff had been performing some sort of fancy experiments in a makeshift lab in an abandoned warehouse by the seaport. There was a lot of expensive equipment in the place, although there’s not much left of any of it. Most everything burned.”

“Do you know what caused the explosion?”

“Yeah, pretty straightforward, really. Run of the mill gas leak. Look, I know your brother’s hurt bad, but what he was doing is illegal. If he makes it we’re gonna have to arrest him.”

*If he makes it? James thought. If he makes it, get in line.*

“So you’re saying I should get him a lawyer?” James asked. “If he makes it?”

“That’s about the size of it, yeah. I’m gonna need to see your ID and take down some info for the record.”

“Sure, no problem.”

The doctor on call didn’t come to see James until long after he’d finished answering the officer’s questions. And it wasn’t the

doctor who was on call when Jeff was brought in, but the one who'd taken over after his shift. It didn't matter. The news was the same no matter who gave it. Jeff was paralyzed. He would never walk again.

"Can I see him?"

"Yes, he's in recovery. He's still pretty groggy. He's unaware of the permanence of his injury."

"Believe me, doctor—I'm sure he isn't."

James's knees buckled when he saw his brother. He was hooked up to about six different machines, all of them beeping and blipping. Wires were coming out of what seemed like every part of him. James walked to the gurney and stood next to him. To his surprise, Jeff opened his eyes.

"Jimmy, you found me."

"I only recently learned you were hiding, but yeah, it seems I've found you. What the heck happened, Jeff?"

Jeff smiled. He was clearly severely medicated, yet oddly coherent. "I lit my pipe," he said, as if it were the punch line to an inside joke.

"It's going to be okay, Jeff. It's going to be okay." James was speaking to his brother the way he spoke to Stanley when he got fussy.

"I seriously doubt it. I don't know if you're yet aware, but in addition to being what I presume is a paraplegic for the rest of my life, I'm also a fugitive."

"I am aware. We'll talk about it when you're feeling better."

"I was so close, Jimmy, so close. But it's all gone now. Poof!" Jeff closed his eyes.

"Don't talk anymore, Jeff. You need to rest."

"At least they won't be able to get their hands on it," he said, his eyes still closed.

“Who get their hands on what?”

“Dr. Warren and his mind-control posse. They won’t get their hands on the chip. The data was destroyed in the explosion.”

*Mind control?* Jeff was clearly spewing nonsense.

“Sleep, Jeff. Just sleep.”

James put his hand to his brother’s forehead. Jeff’s skin was so pale and cold. If the machines hadn’t been blinking otherwise, James would have thought he was a corpse. He made sure Jeff was sleeping soundly before he went to find a phone to call Jane.

“It’s bad, Janey. He’ll never walk again.” James couldn’t believe those words were coming out of his mouth.

“Oh, no! Dear God. What happened, James?”

“I don’t know. A gas explosion. He’s in trouble, Jane. He needs a lawyer. I know Fiona’s husband is a divorce attorney, but do you think you can call him for a recommendation?”

“Of course, love. At the break of dawn.”

“How’s Stanley?” James asked, wiping his eyes.

“Fine, he’s just fine. We both are. I’m sorry about before, James—the way I reacted when I heard about Jeff. There’s just such an unreal quality to all of this. Like something you’d see on the telly.”

“I know. But Jeff’s going to really need our help, Janey. We have to be there for him.”

“We will, love. We will.”

About ten hours had passed since James arrived at the hospital. Nevertheless, he found it impossible to leave. He called home again, and with some concern in her voice, Jane told him, “I forgot to mention that Dr. Warren person called again early this morning, from the university. It was strange, for him to call so early from California. I thought it was you calling again. I didn’t say anything about the accident, but I got the impression

that he somehow knew. He wants to speak with you when you get home.”

“Maybe the same guy that called me called him. You never know. But from now on the only person who’s going to speak to Dr. Warren is Jeff’s lawyer.”

“I’ll call Fiona as soon as we hang up.”

“Thanks. I’m going to stay here until Jeff has stabilized a bit. I’ll try to be home for dinner though.”

“I love you.”

“Love you too, Janey.”

*“Dr. Warren and his mind control posse... They won’t get their hands on the chip.” Jane’s right, James thought. It’s probably just something Jeff saw on TV.*